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ABSTRACT

Americans doing business with West Africans are limited in their ability to communicate successfully in that part of the world because of language, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism. Americans must become accustomed to British patterns of speech and writing. Stereotypes of Africa, its people, and its cultures perpetuated by the media keep Americans from recognizing and appreciating the great diversity of the continent. American ethnocentrism and attitudes about foreign cultures in general also create a barrier to communication. Americans must consciously explore African culture and economy to understand the West African perspective. (MSE)

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Transcending Communication Barriers with West Africa

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Abstract

Because of the emerging global economy in the United States, Americans doing business here or abroad have a wider need to communicate with persons from other cultures. This interaction may be with West Africans, persons of whom Americans have many unfounded misconceptions and biases. This paper will explore some of these mistaken beliefs and will examine how language, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism limit Americans' ability to successfully communicate with West Africans. Based on the author's experiences traveling in and living with persons from West Africa, the paper offers a number of practical solutions that enhance the oral and written communication process between persons from two vastly different cultures.

Transcending Communication

Barriers with West Africa

On the threshold of rapid change is the U.S. economy as it struggles to compete in the marketplace abroad. In their futuristic novels, two well-known authors assert this fact. Alvin Toffler (1980) declares that the world is becoming more interconnected with the rise of the global corporation. John Naisbitt (1982) predicts that the United States' economy is shifting from a national one to a global one. Indeed, the world is becoming a global village; therefore, many American businessmen and women may find themselves increasingly having to communicate in a global market. Most Americans need to be able to interact successfully with persons from less-industrialized societies or the so-called developing nations since persons from these countries differ from the average American in hue, in hair texture, in culture, and in worldview or basic value system.

Perhaps Americans in business may work in developing nations like those in West Africa, or they may work in American companies employing West African workers or having customers who hail from that developing region. They may even work in companies exporting to or importing from there. Therefore, whether Americans have to deal with the West African in this country or abroad, they should be prepared to skillfully and sensitively communicate within such an intercultural environment.

However, many barriers prevent a meaningful, successful cultural interchange. In looking at communication with West Africa, this paper will attempt to perfect the intercultural communication process by isolating three important barriers: language, stereotype, and ethnocentrism.

West Africans have a diverse linguistic heritage. There are at least nine major language groups which are further subdivided into dialect clusters, ranging from ten in some areas to 46 in others.

The West Atlantic languages are spoken along the Coast from Senegal to Liberia to the Ivory Coast. Major indigenous languages spoken and written are Twi, Yoruba, Hausa, Ewe, Ga, Wolof, and Mande.

In those countries once under British rule, educated persons and others who have acquired basic conversational English still widely use this language of international commerce. But because the British have greatly influenced these Africans' speech patterns, one would have to become accustomed to the pronunciation, expressions, and idioms.

In Ghana, for example, minerals refer to soda or pop, not to diamond, copper, or malachite, which abounds in some parts of Africa. Also, meeting one at a round-a-bout to take a lorry translates as meeting at a circle to board a truck (a form of private transit system).

In any English-speaking country in West Africa, a as in tomato is pronounced ah (tō mah tō) or banana (bah nah nah).

When communicating in writing, one should expect to see the formal writing style of the British. Letters may contain expressions that Americans label as stilted or outmoded: We trust that you will find, most faithfully yours. All forms of written communication use British variants: colour instead of color, favour instead of favor, cheque instead of check, centre instead of center. Dates are written with the date preceding the month, so look for the date May 15, 1987 (5/15/87) to be written as 15/5/87.

Stereotyping, a very destructive behavior which makes persons see others as "caricatures, overlooking their individuality," (Draguns, 1980) is another barrier to meaningful communication with West Africans.

When most Americans think of Africa, they visualize a hot, steamy place filled with jungles teeming with wild animals and naked men and women. Actually, true jungles rarely exist in Africa. Many tropical rain forests cover about one-fifth of the continent. Untamed animals live in the savannas or grasslands, which cover more than two-fifths of the continent. This fascinating continent is a land where temperatures are as varied as its languages and its peoples. One may find a 163° day in the Sahara, but a 70° day in the mountains of the Kwahu region in Ghana is not uncommon. Africans wear either brightly colored traditional dress or fashionable, sometimes trendy Western-style clothing. Still, others may be as skimpily clad as Western bikini wearers. Visitors to the continent frequently become overwhelmed by the unexpected mind-boggling diversity in this land of contrasts.

Today, the Western media continues perpetuating stereotypes. Everyone is familiar with Tarzan, king of the jungle, whom Alex Haley (The Baltimore Sun, 1987), author of Roots, says was the "single image of Africa" shown in the West before his best selling novel and popular movie. Tarzan is still reigning in the jungle as millions of American children watch him in television cartoons and read about him in comic books.

More recently, the image being perpetuated is one of the hungry, poor African. The recent Ethiopian famine relief efforts, along with the CARE commercials, firmly implant the destitute, starving African image in Americans' minds. Even though Ethiopia is in eastern Africa, its plight is associated with that of West Africa and of other parts of the continent.

Ethnocentrism is a third barrier to communicating across cultures. The term originated by Sumner in his book Folkways is used to denote the tendency of most people to use their own beliefs, values, mores, practices, and so on "as a standard for judging others." (Hoult, 1969).

Most stories on other countries and cultures written in today's newspapers and shown on television are ethnocentric. Even the courses offered in America's schools and colleges imply that our country is the greatest while others are inferior. World History and World Literature courses usually do not include topics on Africa or works written by African authors. Recently while speaking at a conference in Louisiana, Wole Soyinka, Nobel prize-winning Nigerian novelist, spoke about how Americans tend to overlook works published by West African authors. He accused America of "ignoring a recent burst of literature coming out of Africa." (The Louisiana Weekly, 1987). What is the solution to overcoming these barriers to successful communication with West Africans? Finding persons who are prepared to educate themselves about the language and literature of this culturally different region and who are willing to shift their culturally limited means of interacting with persons from West Africa would be an ideal starting point for embarking upon this venture.

Since communicating with a culture through its language is important, Americans interested in doing business with West Africans must overcome their narrowness in linguistic sophistication by learning to speak a few expressions in the indigenous language of the country with which they will have dealings to begin to successfully communicate interculturally. For example, learning a few expressions in Twi, Ewe, or Ga, if they will be dealing with Ghanaians, or learning expressions in Yoruba or Hausa if they will be dealing with Nigerians will certainly enhance

the intercultural encounter.

A further step to successful intercultural communication is for Americans to become aware of stereotyping created by Western media. They must work to dispel damaging stereotypes by becoming acquainted with modern African cinema and publications. They should view movies and documentaries promoting positive African images. Movies created by internationally-famous Senegalese producer, Ousmane Sembene, and a documentary produced by Ali Mazrui, well-respected Kenyan scholar, do much to expand our knowledge of African culture. Also, Americans must read publications like West Africa, African Report and African Business to learn about the political and economic outlook for West African countries.

Lastly, for Americans to successfully interact with West Africans, they must adjust their ethnocentric attitudes toward foreign cultures. Certainly, a starting place for accomplishing this adjustment is to begin to understand the worldview or basic value system of a people. Exploring the rich literary heritage of West Africans reveals much about their values. Reading fables, proverbs, and song lyrics offers one the ability "to make a distinction between traditional values and modern ones that have replaced or become integrated with traditional ones." (Roberts, 1979). Just as reading works by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison provides one with aspects of the African-American perspective in literature so would reading works by Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka and Ama Ata Aidoo give us a much-needed African prespective in literature.

Finally, those who are most willing to broaden their awareness of other cultures through an understanding of their history, art, and culture should prove to be the most valuable and sought after by today's multinational corporations.

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